

2: Jones-Jackson L-5 (1973-1986) 1987
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South Carolina

38 The Folk Literature

538
517 subtropical location, one can find men, women, and children sitting in kitchens smelling the welcome aroma of "hoppin John and bone" cooking in a pot or just sitting, smoking pipes (men and women smoke pipes on the Sea Islands), and watching the torrential rain beat against the windowpanes. The best stories I collected on the Sea Islands and in Africa, however, were ones I heard at night in front of the fireplaces when all the daily tasks were completed, supper had been served, the children had been bathed, and everyone was relaxed, content, and gazing into the open fire. The fire had a hypnotic effect, and one's imagination could easily see forms amid the light and shadows of the flames while one listened to the teller unravel his tale.

• (264) During the cold season on the Sea Islands (*harmattan* in Africa), yams (or *ji*, the Igbo name for a kind of potato) are often covered with the hot coals of the fire, baked, and offered as refreshments to the entertainer, who never seems to fail to make his tale more pleasing as a result. Gin, homemade brews, and other warming drinks are often passed around if there is a good group of tellers and listeners. In Igbo, (213) Yoruba, and Ibebio villages fresh palm wine, chilled or served at room (171) temperature, and cola nuts are always welcome refreshments during storytelling times.

538 Though everyone is potentially capable of telling a tale, I soon learned that not everyone can tell a *good* tale. Sea Island informants with whom I spent much time over several years often attempted to tell stories only in an effort to help me along with my work. Others felt a strong need to compensate me for coming such a long way to talk to them or to hear their stories. Thus they made efforts to tell tales even when the occasion was not conducive for a telling to begin. In this situation the teller was often tense, rushed, and unprepared to do his best; the tale would often be confused, lacking in plot, and generally uninteresting. But it is well known among the islanders and the Nigerians who the good storytellers are, and after some time I was directed to those tellers well known for their performances of the oral traditions and gifted in the oral technique. In the words of one of the islanders, "some people de gift for lie." The world *lie* has more than (196) one denotation on the Sea Islands: it not only means that one is not telling the truth; it is also a term associated with any kind of fictional tale told primarily for entertainment.

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462 There are certain cultural taboos associated with Sea Island storytelling. More men than women tell tales. Men are expected to be

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The Storytellers 55

She is fifty or

159 more years of age, gets around well, is the oldest member of her household, and is primarily responsible for the total care of more than ten children, ranging in ages from two to sixteen years of age. Some of (855) them are her own children; others are her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Six of them live with her, and four are left in her care during the day while their parents are away working. I had the pleasure (123) of spending more than two weeks residing with Miss Deeley and her large family. I shared a large room with three of the girls and came to appreciate the effort that went into keeping that room clean and orderly at all times. No one was allowed to retire for the evening without a (515) bath regardless of circumstances. Most of the time, a fire was built around a large black pot in the early evening to heat the water for baths before supper was served. All the children were lined up and given baths in a number-three washtub, given their nightclothes, and served supper around a large handmade wooden table. Miss Deeley had not (364) accepted electricity for her home, so a kerosene lamp was the primary source of light after nightfall. Mealtime was always a pleasure at this home. The last meal of the day often consisted of cowpeas and rice (264) cooked and seasoned with "bone," or rice served with shrimp and (262) other fish caught by the children during the day. There was always hot corn bread and molasses and a bucket of iced tea.

159 After meals were served, the children gathered around the open fireplace, and Miss Deeley entertained all of us for hours until the fire died down and the sleeping children had to be carried to their beds. 539 This woman was an avid storyteller. Her general procedure was first to get everyone settled. Then she herself could get comfortable in the place always reserved for her by the window. After poking around in the fire until she was satisfied that it was burning well, she would lean back in her chair, take a couple of good bites of tobacco, kept in her apron pocket, and then lift up the youngest child into her lap and begin to reminisce about happenings during the day. She had the ability to tell a range of stories, but she seemed particularly adept at hag, ghost, or other psychological thrillers. She traveled around much in her day as a migrant worker in Arizona and Colorado; she said she heard some of her stories around the campfires there. Others she had learned from her parents and grandparents, and still others she said she had just made up to keep the children entertained.

538 Miss Deeley was fairly strict with the children. Once she permitted 115 two of the oldest to go to the island store for some "sweet"; she spat

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100 The Texts

538 so that it will participate in the event by responding to certain cues given by the teller.

The teller's call and the audience's reply are often simultaneous. Clearly they must be distinguished on the printed page, and separating them formally as is done here helps clarify the degree to which the speaker and the audience rely on back-and-forth interplay to develop and perpetuate a rhythmic flow once the tale begins.²⁴

128 The following notational conventions have been used to provide more information concerning the context in which these tales were told. Double exclamation marks indicate loudness, and triple exclamation marks, extreme loudness. Parentheses enclose indications of non-verbal communicative behaviors, such as long pauses, laughter, eye or hand movements, or meditations. Dashes indicate interruptions or pauses in thought or speech. Ellipsis dots show omissions. A series of hyphens indicates phonological lengthening, as in O-o-o-kay! Italics are used for responses and for emphasis on words or phrases. Square brackets enclose translations or interpolations of words or letters.

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• [264] These tales were told around a fire site at a local store just after nightfall on Wadmaw Island. Approximately twenty or thirty people gathered, eating crabs and roasting hot dogs while they waited for the storytelling session to begin. The order here does not necessarily reflect the order in which tales were told. Further, some tellers were better performers than others and thus were asked to tell several tales before the session ended.

"The Man and the Skita [Mosquito]" is an extension of the Clever Slave Motif J1114.01 (more commonly known in the United States as an "old marster and John" tale) and Motif H961, Task Performed by Cleverness. It falls vaguely within Tale Type 920 III, Impossible Task.²⁵ In this tale the philosophical outlook of Ber Rabbit prevails: even when faced with almost insurmountable odds, one can survive not through physical strength but through one's own wit and intelligence.

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113 rham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1940), pp. 321-22. The original source for this order is the *Report of the Commissioner of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands*, 39th Cong., 1st sess., 1865-66, Exec. Doc. 11, p. 10.

23. Guion Johnson, *A Social History of the Sea Islands with Special References to St. Helena Island, South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1930), p. 18.

243 24. Though many writers have stated that rice was a Sea Island crop (see, for example, Wood, *Black Majority*; and Jackson, Slaughter, and Blake, "The Sea Islands as a Cultural Resource"), Professor Charles Joyner has indicated to me (through personal communication) that rice was grown not on the Sea Islands but in rice fields adjoining nearby mainland rivers. Rice requires fresh water, and the flooding and draining of rice fields require freshwater rivers moved by ocean tides. Thus Sandy Island had rice fields but the ocean islands did not.

113 25. Wood, *Black Majority*, p. 59.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

27. Ruth Finnegan, *Limba Stories and Storytelling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).

262 28. Rice is normally eaten for breakfast, lunch, and dinner in variation with different meats, gumbos, greens, and sauces, many of which are still prepared and eaten on the islands in traditional fashions. Two carry-overs, for example, are a kind of okra soup called *ofey okra* in Igbo and a turnip green dish prepared with bits of meat, onion, hot peppers, and pepper sauce that has its counterpart in Yoruba, Igbo, and Ibibio cultures. In Africa these vegetable and meat dishes are eaten with *fufu* or *gari*, a soft substance about the consistency of bread dough. On the islands, instead of *fufu* and *gari*, corn bread is served with the greens or okra soup; small bits are pinched off, mashed together with the fingers, and then dipped and rolled in the vegetable sauce.

113 29. Guion Johnson, *History of the Sea Islands*, p. 26.

30. Quoted in Crum, *Gullah*, p. 70.

[22] 31. This practice was also observed by Jackson, Slaughter, and Blake; see "The Sea Islands as a Cultural Resource."

538 32. *Ber* is the Sea Island form of the word *Ber*.

000 33. Crum, *Gullah*, p. 55.

34. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 60.

825 35. This observation may in part answer a question posed by Richard Dorson, an avid researcher and collector of black folktales. Dorson observes that southern blacks drew a fair portion of their folktale material from the barnyards, fields, and woods which formed their environment. "Why they neglected such familiar denizens as the coon and the possum," he comments, "in favor of the rabbit and the fox, and preferred the buzzard over the owl, remain teasing questions" (*American Negro Folktales* [New York: Fawcett, 1967], p. 67). Perhaps the questions are not "teasing" at all. The animals of the tales are intensely interesting to the islanders because they have had to study these animals so closely to learn to hunt them. According to some of the island storytellers—people who are also known for their hunting skills—such animals as the buzzard are revered for their patience. They are often used as foils to much smarter animals like the monkey or the rabbit. On the other hand, the rabbit is renowned for his cunning and his illusionary and evasive skills. Though his teeth are sharp, he has no

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Miss Yvonne Hunter
ALL US WORKS

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I am in third grade. I got left down one year because my mother was in New York one spring and I didn't have no shoes. I take arithmetic, language and reading. I like arithmetic best. When I grow up, if I don't be a secretary, I want to be a nurse.

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For lunch at school we have popcorn, links, milk, roll, and have soup sometime. We have to pay for it. Sometime we take sandwich. At home we have grits, sometime rice for breakfast. Put milk and butter on rice. And have bread. Supper we have chicken and rice. Have greens, sometime cornbread and soup—vegetable soup. When Itchy and Joe go in the creek, we have oysters, crab, clams, fish.

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 (513)

Mother want us in bed at six o'clock. Sometime we go to bed seven-thirty. Six sleep in a room. Tina and me sleep together, and Patricia and her two children sleep together, Mama and Papa sleep together, and Itchy sleep on the chair, and David and Johnny sleep on the couch.

We get up six o'clock. The bus come by at seven. School start at eight-thirty. It takes five minute to get to school in the bus. I wash dishes before I go to school.

All us works. Sometime I wash dishes and I sweep the floor and I mop the floor. I cook. I cook grits, rice, cornbread. I cook meat, fry chicken, and I can make macaroni, and I can make salad.

I don't know if I want to get married. I don't like boys.

9: Parrish B-4,5 (ca.1916-1941) 1942

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Georgia
St. Simon's Island

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Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands

"SETTIN'-UP"

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078) The custom of "settin'-up" with the dead still prevails among the Negroes, who even go so far as to ask for such a privilege on the death of a white employer to whom they are devoted. Mrs. Shadman told me that when her grandmother, Margaret Cater, died at Kelvin Grove, her family's ex-slaves came all day "to see the face." At dusk they appeared again and sat up with "Ole Miss" through the night, singing, moaning, and praying until sun-up. When Mrs. Shadman died this year, two young colored men whom she had befriended since childhood continued the custom and sat up with the body.

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152) In some districts a "settin'-up," or "wake," as such a ceremony is now called, is more emotional than in others, and certain families are known to be extremely excitable on such occasions. A man who works for me now and then said he did not like to go to a "settin'-up" because "they holler so much." ¹³ A wake held at the home of the deceased is likely to be a quieter affair than one held in a church, where the mourners are apt to display a frenzy of grief. When the body is taken from the church, the "hollerin'" begins in earnest. I have always wondered if the stimulation of an audience had anything to do with the difference.

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224) At a private "settin'-up" a big fire of logs in front of the cabin lasts through the night, and rude benches, made of boards laid on sections of a tree trunk, are placed around it. Quantities of coffee in a pot beside the fire, and a large carton of soda crackers help revive the tired mourners and keep them awake.

763) The Negroes often have a premonition of death. On St. Simon's, Deacon Henry Armstrong, who had been ailing for some months, realized his time was short, and sent for his family and friends. When they arrived he was eating his supper of fish, grits, and coffee. Later, when he stood up, moved about, and began preaching his own funeral sermon, as was sometimes done, his hearers wondered if he was "touched in the head." He called upon one deacon to sing "Old-Time Religion" and then upon another for a prayer. When a member of the group came forward to pray, Henry told him not to proceed, that he was not worthy. A "sister" came to shake his hand and say good-bye; he told her she must go to her father and mother, and beg their pardon for the wrong she had done them. She did as

(171) ¹³ Such behavior is in line with established African tradition. In Astley's Collection of Voyages and Travels it is stated that "the cry . . . is sometimes a fortnight or month after the decease. . . . They begin with crying and at night they go to singing and dancing, and so continue till they break-up."

9: Parrish B-4,5 (ca.1916-1941) 1942

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Georgia

St. Simon's Island

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Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands

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After death I got to stan' a tes'
After death I got to stan' a tes'
Oh Lordy, after death I got to stan' a tes'
Lord, I wouldn' mind dyin' if dyin' was all.

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[171]

Dishwashing is another of the monotonous jobs which invite the accompaniment of flowing song. In my own kitchen I have heard dishes disposed of to a tune which, surprisingly enough, has an Algerian counterpart. I heard it first, from my hotel on the heights of Constantine, played on a primitive pipe in the little Berber village at the base of the cliff far below. It was repeated over and over—that is why I am familiar with it. Apparently, the tune bothered a cow, for her bellowing frequently gave me a respite. The air is lovely, but when heard by the hour it is not so enjoyable.

(539)

I want a die easy when I die
O when I die.
I want a die easy when I die
I want a die easy when I die—Shout salvation as I fly
I want a die easy when I die.

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Until after the War Between the States stoves were unknown in the South, and cooking was done mostly in large fireplaces with cranes and hooks for hanging pots and kettles over the heat. Meat was roasted in "tin kitchens" placed in front of the fire, although the remains of an enormous brick oven at Cannon's Point indicate the part it played in the large-scale hospitality of the Couper family. Cooking, in fact, was one of those interrupted jobs which required undivided attention, and for that reason, perhaps, I never heard of a good cook who sang.

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On St. Simon's and Jekyll Islands great quantities of cotton were grown. The best description of the process was given by Captain Basil Hall in 1828. He tells how the "task" varied with the heaviness of the work. In describing the "listing" of the ground—breaking it with a broad cotton-field hoe—he said that "a full hand lists half an acre." Janey Jackson must have been a full hand, for she told of doing her half-acre and thinking nothing of it. She and Floyd White's parents belonged to the (533) Caters, and both sang a tune which was a favorite for hoeing cotton. They agreed that "June month was a ha'd month": the weeds grew fast and the sun was hot.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
(1525-ca. 1880)

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(412)
(285) huge logs hollowed at one end. At these, two stood with their rude pestles striking alternately up and down. After the corn was shelled, the driver poured all upon a large hide or blanket and measured each person's portion into a basket, made by hand from pine straw and palmetto. After receiving the corn, the women ground it into grits, each waiting her turn at one of the hand-mills near the cornhouse.

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262 With the aid of her children, the mother prepared supper from the rations just issued, supplementing the corn and salt pork with "turnip salad" or cow-peas from the "patch" back of the cabin, sweet potatoes roasted in the ashes, oysters or crabs from the creek, or with luxuries which she had bought at one of the island stores. Into the black pot placed on a bed of coals on the hearth went the grits to be boiled until thick and tender, or, perhaps, vegetables and fat pork might be cooking there. If so, the corn meal, which had come out of the mill together with the grits, would be made into a pone, cooked either on the open hearth or, if the family were thrifty, in a frying pan over the coals. The elders first helped themselves from the pot, and then turned it over to the children who ate to their satisfaction, and finally relinquished it to the dogs, invariably a part of the slave family, who licked it clean for the next meal.³⁵

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264 The mother also prepared the hasty breakfast eaten just after the conch blew at "day clean," if, indeed, the workers took time for breakfast, and filled her own and

³⁵ See Laura M. Towne, "Pioneer Work on the Sea Islands," *Southern Workman*, July, 1901.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930

(1525-ca. 1880)

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THE SLAVE COMMUNITY

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her husband's pails which they took to the field with them for dinner.²⁶

If the wife were frugal, she might have a portion of the weekly rations left when Monday came around again, and these she might either feed to her pigs and chickens or sell to the overseer or to an island storekeeper. The money was hers to use for the good of the family, but it was hers, nevertheless. It was the woman of the family who, with the aid of her children, worked most of the family patch, and it was usually the woman who marketed the produce and pocketed the money received in exchange.

The planters helped to make of woman the dominant sex in the family life of the slave by the position which they gave her in the plantation regime. The cabin was hers. The children, too, were listed on the plantation records as belonging to the mother. Seldom was the father's name indicated. Thus a person might go through life known as Binah's Toby or Moll's July. Likewise the mother had the privilege of naming the new baby unless she graciously yielded the right to its father or to a friend or relative. In this right she often exercised a singular taste, for one child might be called Jupiter, another Quash, a third January, and a fourth Hard Times.

Miss Towne was amused at the jealousy of their "natural rights" which the men on St. Helena Island began to show after that region had come under the jurisdiction of the Federal Army during the Civil War. "Political freedom they are rather shy of, and ignorant of," she

²⁶ Some planters, as it has already been pointed out, delegated plantation cooks to prepare the noon meal for the field hands so that they might have something hot to eat at this time. Some planters also allowed an hour's rest at nine o'clock for breakfast.

11: Johnson H-4,5 (no date) 1930
(1525-ca. 1880)

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St. Helena Island

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A SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE SEA ISLANDS

567 Obviously, there was not the opportunity for home
264 life in the slave family that there was in the free family,
592 nor was meal time the institution that it was in the white
567 family, for there was rarely to be found in the slave cabin
593 a "family table."³³ Some observers of slave life thought
also that there was little family affection among them.
Edward S. Philbrick wrote to a friend that there was far
less family affection and attachment among members of
slave families than existed among the Irish peasants, add-
ing, however, that he did not know "how much allowance
to make for their being so much less demonstrative in their
emotions, and more inured to suffering."³⁴

LEISURE TIME

567 When task was done, the slave was his own master
461 within the limits of plantation regulation. He might go
home to work on his piece of ground, tend his pigs and
chickens, play with his children, or fish in the creek. The
567 slave had several ways of making money for his own use,
461 in which he was encouraged by his master. As has already
432 been pointed out, the black people ordinarily supplied
434 their masters with chickens and eggs for which they usu-
ally received the market price.³⁵ They often sold their
hogs and the truck from their garden patches; they wove
baskets, and made boats and canoes. An overseer on the
Butler plantation on St. Simon's Island said that he regu-
larly allowed a certain number to go to town on Sundays

³³ Pierce, "Report," *Rebellion Records*, sup., I, 304. "Except on Sundays, these people do not take their meals at a family table, but each one takes his hominy, bread, or potatoes sitting on the floor or on a bench, and at his own time. They say their masters never allowed them any regular time for meals." In this connection see *supra*, p. 137n.

³⁴ *Letters from Fort Royal*, p. 15.

³⁵ *Supra*, p. 36.